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ABSTRACT

This research report examines community college administrators' perspectives on institutional missions and priorities, while taking note of regional differences in their views. The brief also examines factors that keep administrators engaged and satisfied in their positions. The research reported here comes from a national survey that used a stratified random sample of 1,700 community college administrators across 14 position codes, drawn from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) data bank. Data collection efforts yielded a 54% usable survey response rate. The instrument consisted of 34 open-ended, closed-ended, and Likert-scale questions. The report is divided into the following categories: (1) important external issues facing community colleges; (2) important internal issues facing community colleges; (3) important technology issues facing community colleges; (4) what keeps administrators in their positions; (5) administrators' satisfaction levels with aspects of their institutions; (6) administrators' satisfaction levels with the quality of support for women's and minority issues; and (7) administrators' satisfaction levels with aspects of their careers. Some of the findings regarding internal issues include: 54% of administrators rated student retention as very important, and 51% rated creation of new program delivery systems as very important. Only 22% considered faculty compensation to be very important, while 15% considered collective bargaining to be very important. (NB)

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# The Institutional Context of Community College Administration

Marilyn J. Amey
Kim E. VanDerLinden

American Association of Community Colleges
Research Brief AACC-RB-02-03

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RESEARCH BRIEF

No. 4
Leadership Series

# The Institutional Context of Community College Administration

By Marilyn J. Amey and Kim E. VanDerLinden

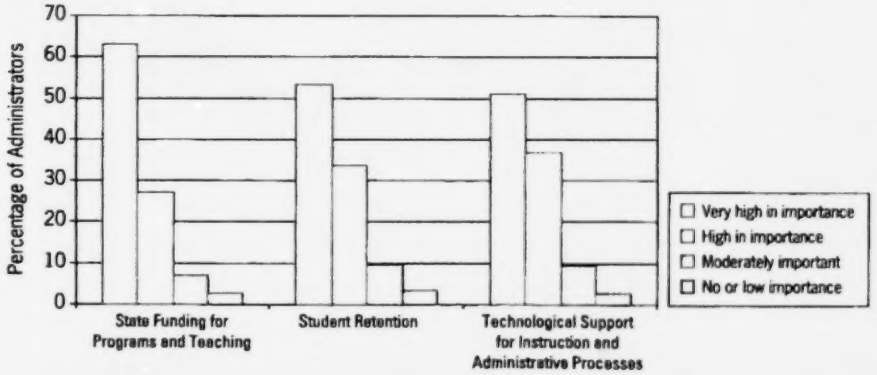
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief examines administrator perspectives on institutional mission and priorities, while taking note of regional differences in perspectives. In addition, this brief presents other dimensions of the institutional context such as the factors that keep administrators engaged and satisfied in their positions. Given the challenges and opportunities facing community colleges, it is particularly important to understand administrative priorities, as well as factors that affect administrators' satisfaction levels.

**Highlights of research findings:**

- Administrators indicated that academic transfer, workforce preparation, and lifelong learning remain the mission of community colleges, with an increased emphasis on workforce development and technology usage forecasted for the future.
- Administrators advocated a more comprehensive mission based on changing constituent needs and a more focused mission because of future funding challenges, reflecting the continuing conflict in institutional priorities.
- Administrators rated the following external issues as very high in importance at their institutions: state financial support for programs and teaching, linkages with business and industry, and meeting community needs.
- The most pressing internal issues, according to administrators, were student retention, creation of new program delivery systems, and student recruitment and marketing.
- A majority of surveyed administrators indicated that technology support for instructional and administrative processes was of very high importance at their institutions.

**FIGURE 1** **Administrator Perspectives on Important Issues at Their Institutions**

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## Introduction

Community colleges have grown considerably in number, size, and organizational complexity since their inception as junior colleges. The "comprehensive community college" of the late 1990s and early 21st century offers a full array of credit, noncredit, and lifelong learning experiences across a broad array of disciplinary and technical programs. The strength and size of occupational education/vocational education units and the development of new administrative systems, such as business-industry incubators, continuing education units, instructional technology centers, and centers for teaching excellence, are among the many innovations that have taken hold in the last 20 years. Yet, in any complex organization, internal and external environmental pressures cannot go forever unmanaged. Understanding how community college administrators prioritize and differentiate between the array of issues with which they are, and will be, faced is important. In addition, identifying the professional issues that are most important to administrators provides a more complete picture of the context of community college work.

## Study Information

The research reported here comes from a national survey of community college administrators (Amey and VanDerLinden 2002). A stratified random sample of 1,700 community college administrators across 14 position codes was drawn from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) data bank, providing representation by geographic location, urban and rural locale, and single- and multicampus sites. Data collection efforts yielded a 54 percent usable survey response rate. Our instrument consisted of 34 open-ended response, closed-ended response, and Likert-scale questions. We adapted the instrument used by Moore et al. (1985), who studied community college administrative careers and internal and external labor market issues. We updated the survey for language and terminology to provide data for direct comparison and also constructed additional questions about institutional issues. New questions addressed current organizational and leadership trends, issues, and foci of community college leaders based on an extensive literature review of other key administrative studies and instruments.

The survey respondents held positions in a variety of senior-level administrative jobs including presidents, provosts, chief academic officers, chief student affairs officers, occupational education directors, chief business and administrative officers, directors of continuing education, learning resources directors, directors of institutional research and planning, human resources directors, business and industry liaisons, and financial aid directors.

## Mission

We asked administrators to comment on the mission priorities of their institutions at the time of survey completion. We also asked them to reflect on changes occurring in the institutional mission during the last five years and those they saw forecasted over the next 10 years. The intent was to get both a current mission perspective and a sense of the context for institutional mission change over time. Answers were open ended. Content analyses generated themes in the data, and percentages are provided for some of the dominant themes.

### Current Mission Priorities

Several areas of current mission emphasis emerged in the data analysis. A majority of respondents (55 percent) reported the typical tripartite mission of academic transfer, workforce preparation, and lifelong learning/community education. Of those respondents, more than 73 percent specifically mentioned workforce training, economic development, and meeting the needs of business and industry.

Other mission priorities included meeting the needs of the community or region, service to students, diversity, and access to higher education. Although not part of the institutional mission per se, respondents frequently mentioned technology use on campus, including in classes, and funding constraints when identifying current institutional priorities.

### Past Mission Changes

Areas of mission change over the last five years reflect the issues mentioned by administrators as current areas of mission emphasis. Of the 87 percent of administrators who indicated a mission change, workforce/economic development and meeting the training needs of employers and students were consistently mentioned as areas of increased emphasis during the last five years. Administrators indicated institutional missions had expanded, and 10 percent of administrators specifically noted that a shift from teacher to student and learning focus had occurred. Funding issues and state-required accountability were also noted as changes during the last five years. If administrators did not articulate a change in mission, they stated that they saw a change in the means through which missions were accomplished, especially as related to technology and a focus on learning. Increased use of technology in and out of the classroom was mentioned as an institutional change during the last five years by 20 percent of respondents.

### Future Mission Changes

Looking into the future, a majority of administrators (81 percent) identified several areas of mission change over the next 10 years. As expected, these changes reflect the national rhetoric and administrators' evaluation of their present organizational priorities. Themes in the data included: an increase in vocational training (mentioned by 25 percent of respondents); use of technology in instruction and administration (mentioned by 26 percent of respondents); and increased development of certificate and baccalaureate programs and the introduction of other offerings to meet constituent needs (mentioned by 22 percent of respondents). Modes of instructional delivery were expected to continue to evolve through the use of technology, including distance education and online courses, and delivery of content via short courses. These forecasted changes in service delivery were accompanied by an expectation of increased funding challenges and an increase in the diversity of students.

Administrators suggested both a greater need to expand to a more comprehensive institutional mission as well as a need to emphasize different aspects of the mission rather than maintaining an "all things to all people" philosophy. This finding is reminiscent of the historical paradox between responsiveness and "mission creep/diffusion." State and regional environmental factors could affect how individual respondents viewed the future mission priorities. Movement toward a learner-centered environment was mentioned as an area of future mission change, referring more often to supporting diverse learners and learning needs rather than organizational learning.

Finally, similar to those not reporting past mission changes, the 19 percent of administrators who did not expect their institution's mission to change over the next 10 years believed the means of accomplishing the mission and terms used to define mission would be different (for example, the definition of community college students would be different in 10 years as compared to now).

## Institutional Issues Facing Community Colleges

We asked respondents to rate a series of issues facing community colleges on a scale from 1–5, with 1 indicating no importance at their institution and 5 indicating very high importance at their institution. Responses provided data on pressing external and internal issues facing respondents' institutions,

changes in organizational mission and priorities, and infusion of technology. Data demonstrate areas and issues of overall concern, such as governance issues including board relations, internal administrative processes, and funding; student development/population issues including diversity, multiculturalism, retention, and learning needs; and technology issues including online recruitment, online student services, and technological competence of administrators. Some of the issues seem directly a function of articulated mission and change in mission, yet others seem more consistent across the sample and therefore, may be considered symptomatic of the state of postsecondary education today.

## External Issues

The external issues we asked administrators to consider included the following: financial support from local, state, and federal sources; K–12 student preparation; articulation agreements between high schools and other colleges and universities; community needs; links to business and industry; and other accountability and planning issues. The issues and the corresponding percentage of administrators who ranked the issue as very high in importance to their institutions are listed in Table 1.

## Regional Differences

The extent to which respondents rated external issues as very important differed by region (see Figure 2 for regional divisions). In New England, state issues were of utmost importance. More than 60 percent of respondents rated as very high in importance state financial support for programs and teaching, as well as state financial support for students. Articulation with other colleges and universities was of very high importance to 54 percent of administrators. Federal financial support for students was of higher importance to New England respondents (53 percent) as compared to those in other regions of the country.[1]

**TABLE 1** **Important External Issues Facing Community Colleges**

| Issue | Percentage of administrators rating this issue as very important at their institution |
|---|---|
| State financial support for programs and teaching | 63 |
| Linkages with business and industry | 59 |
| Meeting community needs | 56 |
| Articulation between your institution and other colleges | 49 |
| State financial support for students | 48 |
| Federal financial support for students | 43 |
| Articulation between high schools and your institution | 42 |
| K-12 student preparation | 39 |
| Competition with other institutions | 33 |
| Local financial support for programs and students | 32 |
| Local financial support for students | 31 |
| Changing learner/student demographics | 31 |
| Federal financial support for programs and teaching | 28 |
| Accountability to governmental agencies | 28 |
| Fund raising and alumni relations | 26 |
| State planning for postsecondary education | 22 |

[1] All percentages in parentheses throughout the external, internal, and technology sections represent the percentage of administrators who indicated that the issue was of very high importance at their institutions.



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**FIGURE 2** **Regional Divisions in National Survey of Community College Administrators**

In the Mid-Atlantic region, links to business and industry were rated as very high in importance by more than 66 percent of respondents. State financial support for programs and meeting the needs of the community were ranked equally high in importance by 58 percent of respondents, and articulation with other colleges was ranked almost as high in importance (57 percent).

Respondents in the Great Lakes region gave highest importance to links to business and industry and meeting the needs of the community (respectively, 61 percent and 58 percent). A lower percentage of administrators (50 percent) in the Great Lakes region, as compared to other regions, rated state financial support for programs and teaching as very high in importance.

In the Plains states, more than 68 percent of administrators agreed that state financial support for programs and teaching was of very high importance to their institutions. Links to business and industry, meeting the needs of the community, and articulation with other colleges were rated as very high in importance by more than 50 percent of administrators in the Plains states. Of lesser importance, compared to other regions, were the issues of K–12 student preparation, competition with other institutions, and changing learner demographics.

In the Southeast region of the country, community college administrators overwhelming agreed that the issue of highest importance was state financial support for programs and teaching (71 percent), followed closely by links to business and industry (69 percent) and meeting the needs of the community (66 percent). This finding mirrors the overall important issues, but a much larger percentage of administrators from the southeastern region rated these three issues as very high in importance as compared to the overall average across regions. K–12 student preparation was also very high in importance in the Southeast as compared to other regions (45 percent). And unlike other regions, one-third of the administrators in the Southeast rated accountability to governmental agencies and fund raising as very high in importance.

In the Southwest region of the country, much like the other regions, the issues of importance took on the following order: state financial support for programs and teaching (59 percent), meeting the

needs of the community (54 percent), and links to business and industry (48 percent). Also of great importance were the issues of articulation with high schools (45 percent) and K–12 student preparation (40 percent). More so than other regions of the country, administrators in the Southwest rated local financial support for programs and teaching (40 percent) and local financial support for students (38 percent) as very high in importance.

In the Rocky Mountains, state and local financial support for students (48 and 44 percent, respectively), and programs and teaching (63 and 33 percent) were rated highly, while federal financial support was rated lower (37 percent) than the overall average across regions. Articulation between both colleges and high schools was very important (59 and 56 percent), as was competition with other institutions (44 percent). A much larger percentage of administrators rated these issues as very high in importance compared to the other regions.

The issues of importance to the Western region of the country resembled those in the southeastern United States. An overwhelming 71 percent of administrators rated state financial support for programs and teaching as a very important issue. And approximately 50 percent of administrators rated state financial support for students, meeting the needs of the community, and linkages to business and industry as important issues at their institutions. Of lesser importance in the West, as compared to other regions, were the issues of competition with other institutions, local financial support for programs and teaching, and local financial support for students.

### Internal Issues

The internal issues we asked administrators to consider included: student issues such as recruitment and retention; curriculum issues such as developmental education and creation of new programs and delivery systems; faculty issues such as the growing use of part-time faculty, pending retirements, and faculty development; and administrative issues such as administrator training, planning, and decision making. The issues ranked as being of very high importance by administrators overall are listed in Table 2.

**TABLE 2 Important Internal Issues Facing Community Colleges**

| Issue | Percentage of administrators rating this issue as very important at their institution |
|---|---|
| Student retention | 54 |
| Creation of new program delivery systems (e.g., on-line instruction) | 51 |
| Student recruitment and marketing | 48 |
| Fiscal management and resource allocation | 42 |
| Strategic planning | 39 |
| Creation of new instructional programs | 34 |
| Institutional decision-making processes | 31 |
| Institutional research and data collection | 31 |
| Faculty development | 29 |
| Shift to a learning college paradigm | 27 |
| Developmental education | 24 |
| Faculty recruitment and retention | 23 |
| Pending faculty retirements | 23 |
| Faculty and administrative compensation | 22 |
| Growth in the number of part-time faculty | 20 |
| Collective bargaining | 15 |

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Regional differences in the rating of internal issues showed geopolitical variation that may be a function of many variables beyond this study. Student retention was rated most highly by respondents from the Southeast (60 percent), while creation of new program delivery systems (for example, online instruction) was rated most highly among Great Lakes respondents (62 percent). Student recruitment and marketing was rated most highly by those in the Mid-Atlantic region (54 percent of respondents), who also rated articulation with other colleges as very important. Fiscal management and resource allocation was a key internal issue for respondents from the New England region (47 percent of respondents rated it very important), which corresponds with external state and federal financial concerns raised by this same group. Strategic planning, while not as highly ranked across regions, was most often assessed as very important by those from the Rocky Mountain region (54 percent of respondents).

## Technology Issues

The plethora of conferences, summits, and professional development workshops on the incorporation of technology onto college campuses today, as well as the constant commentary about getting on the "online instructional bandwagon," implies that community colleges, as a sector, are well positioned for new forms of instructional delivery and technological support. Yet, apart from the groundswell of activity, it is not clear which technological issues are deemed most important to community college administrators on their own campuses or the extent to which community colleges are, in fact, offering courses online or through distance education.

We asked administrators to consider a variety of technology-related issues and the importance of each at their institution. The issues included the following: faculty, administrator, and student competence; online services and recruitment; student access to computers; technology support for instruction and administrative processes; and the use and creation of technologically mediated instructional programs. The technology issues rated by administrators as being very high in importance are listed in Table 3.

Overall, administrators agreed that technology and its associated issues were of considerable importance. Although still receiving high ratings on the Likert scale, the following items received considerably less attention as important issues: technological competence for administrators, online student services, and online recruitment.

**TABLE 3** **Important Technology Issues Facing Community Colleges**

| Issue | Percentage of administrators rating this issue as very important at their institution |
|---|---|
| Technology support for instructional and administrative processes | 51 |
| Student access to computers | 45 |
| Use of technology in current instructional programs | 40 |
| Creation of new technologically mediated instructional programs | 38 |
| Technological competence for faculty | 37 |
| Technological competence of students | 36 |
| Online student recruitment/marketing | 30 |
| Online student services | 29 |
| Technological competence for administrators | 24 |

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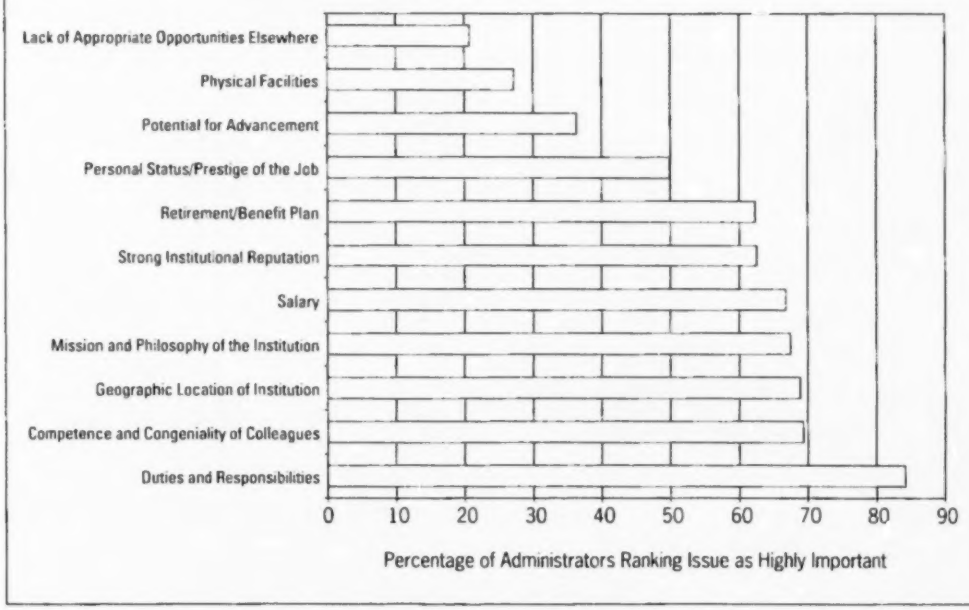
There were some differences in the extent to which regional respondents rated technological issues very important. Fifty-four percent of respondents in both the Mid-Atlantic and Rocky Mountain regions rated technology support for instruction and administrative processes as very important, with 53 percent of those respondents in the Mid-Atlantic region rating student access to computers as very important.

## Institutional Factors: What Keeps Administrators in Their Positions?

We asked administrators to consider a number of reasons why they stay at their institutions. For an overwhelming 84 percent of administrators, the duties and responsibilities of their jobs were of high importance. Sixty-nine percent of administrators indicated that the competence and congeniality of colleagues was of high importance, and 69 percent also agreed that the geographic location of the institution was of high importance in keeping them at their institutions. The mission and philosophy of the institution and salary were of high importance to 68 percent and 67 percent of administrators, respectively. Retirement and benefits plans were not rated as highly as salary, but still a large percentage (62 percent) indicated that it was of high importance.

Other issues of high importance for administrators in staying at their institutions include a strong institutional reputation (63 percent), and 50 percent of administrators indicated that the personal status and prestige of the job was of high importance in keeping them at their institution. Less important reasons for staying at an institution were potential and opportunities for advancement, the lack of appropriate opportunities elsewhere, and the physical facilities of the institution. Respectively, only 36 percent, 21 percent, and 27 percent of administrators rated these items as being of high importance in keeping them at their institutions (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3** **What Keeps Administrators at Their Institutions?**



## Administrator Satisfaction with Aspects of Career/Institution

To gain insight into other aspects of administrator careers, we asked respondents to rate their level of satisfaction with a number of institutional and personal issues, on a scale from 1–5, with 1 indicating not satisfied and 5 indicating very satisfied.

Administrators reported that they were most satisfied with the quality of teaching (64 percent), the quality of instructional programs (60 percent), and the quality of leadership and administrators (52 percent). A smaller percentage of administrators (33 percent) indicated that they were satisfied with the quality of students at their institutions (Figure 4).

Administrators were less affirming about the morale of the faculty and the quality of faculty scholarship. Only 37 percent of administrators expressed high levels of satisfaction with these aspects of their institutions. In addition, fewer administrators had high levels of satisfaction, as compared to other issues, for the quality of support for women's and minority issues at their institutions (Figure 5).

In regard to more personal factors, administrators were most affirming of the overall satisfaction derived from the opportunity to serve others (82 percent), the personal autonomy allotted to them to carry out work responsibilities (79 percent), and from working in higher education (77 percent). More than 71 percent of administrators were also very satisfied with leadership opportunities at their institution, although a much smaller percentage (46 percent) were highly satisfied with the opportunities for professional advancement.

A majority of administrators (66 percent) were also satisfied with the intellectual stimulation and challenge offered by their positions, and a similar percentage of administrators (62 percent) were satisfied with the opportunities to foster change at their institutions. While still a majority, a lower percentage of administrators indicated high levels of satisfaction with the communication flow at their institutions and their financial compensation; 54 percent and 51 percent of administrators indicated high levels of satisfaction with these elements (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 4** **Administrator Satisfaction Levels with Aspects of Their Institutions**

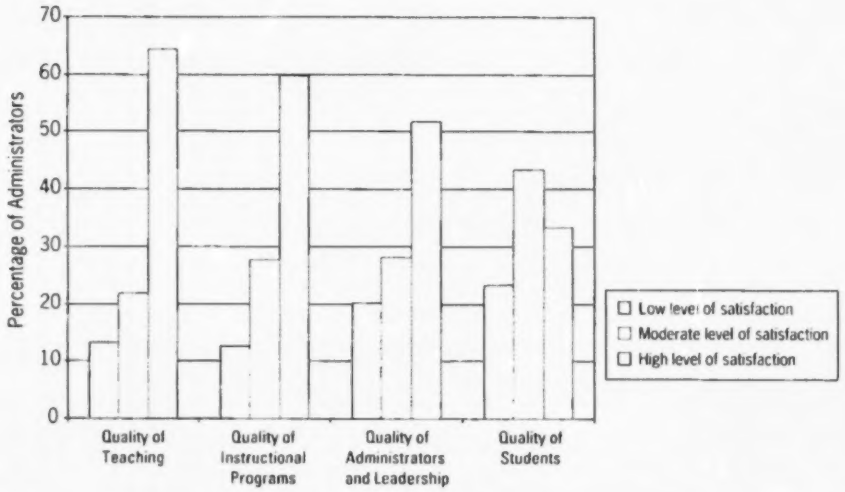


**FIGURE 5** **Administrator Satisfaction with the Quality of Support for Women's and Minorities' Issues**

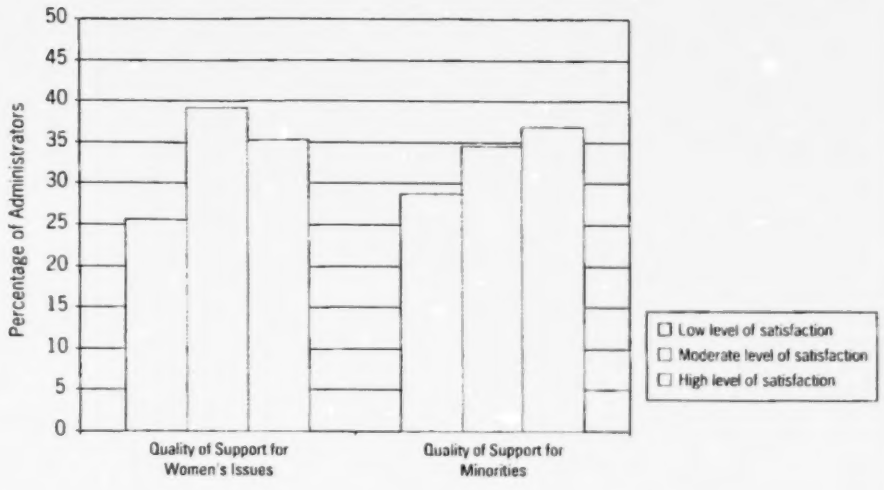
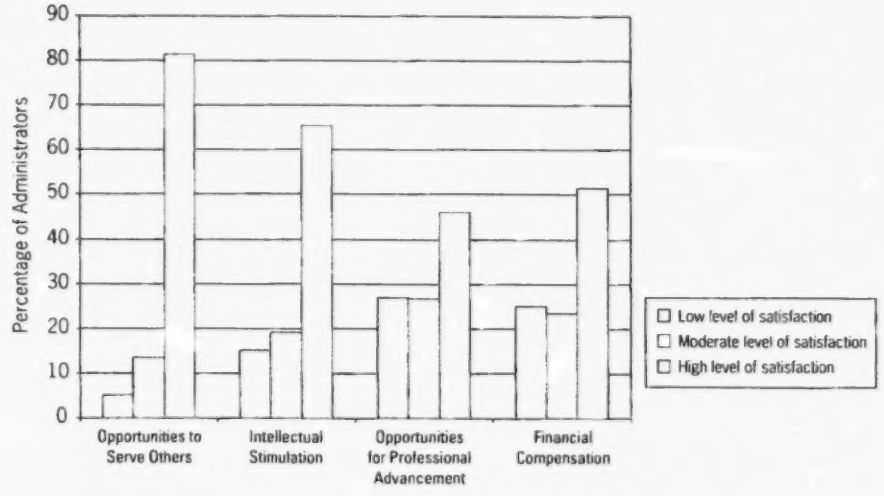



**FIGURE 6** **Administrator Satisfaction Levels with Aspects of Their Careers**



## Overall Satisfaction with Administrative Careers

When asked to tell us if they would choose to be an administrator if they could start all over, an overwhelming percentage (86 percent) of administrators responded yes. When asked to explain their choice, administrators indicated that they enjoyed their work and found their jobs to be fulfilling and rewarding. Administrators recognized that their positions allowed them to make a difference in the lives of students and to create change on their campuses.

## Conclusion

The organizational context for community college administrators seems to be growing in complexity. Community college administrators are faced with the dilemma of how to sustain a comprehensive mission, and the need to make difficult choices between areas of emphasis in times of economic instability. In spite of some regional differences, it is clear that state financial support for instruction, academic programs, and students is an issue of very high importance to administrators at all levels, as is the increased importance of connecting with the needs of business and industry. Even when missions and priorities stay the same, administrators expect that the processes through which they achieve their goals will change, especially in the use of technology. How technology affects community colleges in all respects remains to be seen, as administrators indicated a high priority focus on the development of new academic programs and delivery systems, as well as a great need for better technological infrastructure support for administrators and faculty.

At an institutional level, the organizational context tends to manifest itself in a series of factors affecting administrative satisfaction with careers and jobs. Given the pending retirement onset and leadership gap (Shults 2001), understanding how administrators see the impact of organizational context on career decisions adds additional insight, especially useful when changes can be made at the local level. Institutional leadership, relationships with colleagues, quality instructional programs, and the opportunity to serve others were key components of administrator satisfaction. Faculty morale and student quality were not viewed as favorably, which may become an increased concern as colleges move to greater use of adjunct and part-time faculty and continue to broaden their student base. Support for the concerns of women and minorities was also not as highly perceived. This finding may connect to access and mobility issues for white women and administrators of color noted elsewhere (Amey, VanDerLinden, and Brown 2002), but it is worth attention in a sector that prides itself on open access.

In spite of areas of concern in personal and professional job satisfaction and a challenging organizational context in which to work, a large percentage of respondents indicated a willingness to choose an administrative path again. Commitment to the role of administrators in supporting change and serving others is clear in our study. Providing an organizational context at community colleges that promotes this administrative commitment in the future will be important.

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